



File Code: 5700

Date: June 2, 2004

***Eight Airtanker Vendor
Names & Addresses
removed***

Dear Mr. **(Removed)**:

The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to evaluate options and methods for returning qualified airtankers to firefighting contracts. This letter is intended to update you on the process and provide information to aid in expediting the evaluation of return to service requirements.

To ensure the safety of these aircraft, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are working with FAA engineers to establish criteria and thresholds for contract decisions. There are three areas of concern for which more information is needed from vendors. All are directly related to airworthiness as it applies to the fire fighting environment and are required to address open NTSB Safety Recommendations. General descriptions of the three areas of concern are listed below. Specific requests for information and documentation are provided as enclosures to this letter.

Areas of evaluation:

- 1) **Current condition of the aircraft.** The FAA has provided guidance for inspections to baseline aircraft in key structural areas. Required inspections must be shown to have been completed to the new FAA specifications within the timeframe outlined or prior to consideration for a new contract.
- 2) **Adequacy of the maintenance and inspection programs for continued airworthiness in the fire fighting environment.** Following the accidents of 2002, Phase 1 of the Sandia Laboratories' evaluation of airtanker maintenance and inspection programs was completed and resulted in many enhancements to existing maintenance and inspection programs. However, Phase 1 recommendations were never intended as a stand alone solution to the aging aircraft challenge. They serve only as a starting point for fully validated maintenance and inspection programs to prevent any fatigue related structural failures. The NTSB recommendations of April 23, 2004, establish higher standards against which return to service decisions will be evaluated.



- 3) Operational life limit of aircraft.** FAA, NTSB, and third party engineers have informed the Forest Service that the fatigue life of some airtanker structures may already be exceeded due to widespread and multi-site fatigue damage from prolonged operations. Widespread fatigue damage is characterized by the simultaneous cracks at multiple structural details that are of sufficient size and density such that the structure will no longer meet its damage tolerance requirement and could fail.

Evaluating widespread fatigue damage and multi-site damage in areas not addressed by current inspection programs are central to preventing structural failures in the airtanker fleet. This must be addressed before returning an aircraft to service. This requires that valid life limits be determined for each aircraft type, as well as establishing where each aircraft is in relation to this life limit. This process may involve teardowns, fatigue testing, and detailed engineering analysis. We will continue to work closely with industry, the FAA, and the Department of Defense to help operators gain access to relevant data and testing facilities.

The next step in the return to service process is to provide detailed responses to the data call provided as an enclosure to this letter. Contact Larry Brosnan at (202) 205-1497 with any airworthiness questions related to the process. Call Rick Willis at (208) 387-5669 with questions about the contracting process.

We look forward to working together to return qualifying commercial airtankers to service as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

DALE N. BOSWORTH
Chief

KATHLEEN CLARKE
Director, BLM

Enclosures:

1. Data and information request to vendors
2. FAA inspection and airworthiness criteria
3. Steps required for return to service decisions

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